

Du Pont's demons • Paglia's hit list • Rudy Galindo's gay past

THE  
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**EXCLUSIVE**

# Barbara Jordan: The other life

How the revered congresswoman  
kept her lesbianism a secret  
for almost two decades



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On the cover: Barbara Jordan photographed by Corbis/Bettmann-UPI







# Barbara Jordan

## The other life

Lesbianism was a secret the former congresswoman chose to take to her grave

### Cover Story

By J. Jennings Moss

**"D**o you really have to write this story?" asked an anguished friend of Barbara Jordan. "This is not what Barbara would have wanted." What Jordan would have preferred, say those close to the trailblazing Texas congresswoman—who died of viral pneumonia January 17 at age 59—was to be remembered for her devotion to the U.S. Constitution and for the lives she touched during her teaching career at the University of Texas at Austin.

What she didn't want was to be pigeonholed. "I really do not have much interest in being a symbol," Jordan said in 1976 when her name popped up on Jimmy Carter's list of potential vice presidential running mates. But for those inspired by her, she was a monument. She was the first black woman to be elected to the Texas state senate, the first black Southern woman to be elected to the House of Representatives, and the first black woman to deliver a keynote address to a Democratic national convention, in 1976.

**Groundbreaker**  
Jordan took the lead in confronting political, if not sexual, issues.

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Those were parts of Jordan's profile that were public knowledge. But other aspects of her life were not, and she tried to keep them that way. It wasn't until after her death that people began openly discussing her lesbianism, a topic she had never addressed during her life. The silence was not broken until the *Houston Chronicle* included Nancy Earl, whom it called a "longtime companion," among survivors in an obituary of the congresswoman.

Associates say Jordan was straightforward about her sexual orientation in private but did not think it should be fodder for public consumption. "She never denied who she was," said a friend who, like nearly everyone who knew her personally, asked not to be identified. "It just was not the public's need to know."

"I know I am not alone in feeling less respect for Barbara Jordan for not coming out in death," wrote an *Advocate* reader to the magazine shortly after Jordan's death. "But I am especially anxious for all those of every community who idolized Jordan to know she was a lesbian."

*Austin American-Statesman* reporter Juan R. Palomo, who is gay, says he was bothered by Jordan's silence: "If anybody had the luxury to say, 'By golly, I'm a lesbian, and this is the woman I love,' it was Barbara Jordan. She could have done it, and her stature would not have been diminished one bit."

Many Texas gay rights activists declined to



discuss Jordan's sexual orientation even after her death. "She never announced that she was a lesbian, and I go by the rule that if I wasn't in the bed or under the bed, then I don't know," says Pat Gandy, president of the Houston Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus. Adds Dianne Hardy-Garcia, executive director of the Austin-based Lesbian/Gay Rights Lobby of Texas: "Her sexuality was not something that was discussed." Still, she acknowledges that the topic fueled "a great deal of speculation."

A friend of Jordan's says that Jordan's attitude about discussion of her sexual orientation paralleled her attitude about talking about her health. Jordan long suffered first from multiple sclerosis and then from leukemia—the pneumonia that felled her was a complication of the leukemia—but she often denied she was having health problems. In Congress, for example, she complained of a bum knee when in fact multiple sclerosis was forcing her to walk with a cane. "For years she would refuse to tell people what she had," the friend says. "She was not defined by her physical conditions, her sexual orientation, or the color of her skin. If you were to define her by any of those areas, Barbara Jordan would roar."

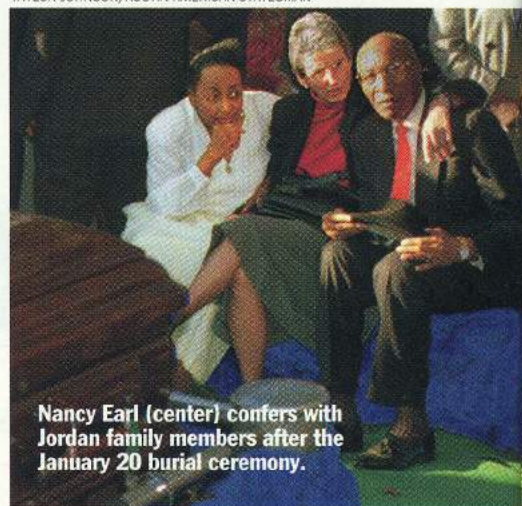
A Baptist minister's daughter, Jordan was born February 21, 1936, in Houston, the youngest of three sisters. As a young adult she joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and decided to become a lawyer, earning an undergraduate degree from the all-black Texas Southern University and a law degree from Boston University before returning to Houston.

Jordan's interest in politics was piqued during the 1960 presidential campaign, when she volunteered to work for the Kennedy-Johnson ticket in Texas. Two years later she made her first stab at elected office when she ran for the Texas house of representatives. She lost, ran for the same seat two years later, and was again defeated. But in 1966 she ran for a state senate seat and won.

Concern about how Jordan's lesbianism might affect her political career surfaced during those early races, according to one of her political advisers. The adviser, who has requested anonymity, says Jordan had a female companion in the early '60s who had joined her on the campaign trail. At one point, either shortly before the 1964 house election or as Jordan prepared to run for the state senate, a small group of advisers warned Jordan that the image of two women being so close could damage her political aspirations. Jordan listened and, without putting up a fight, agreed to impose a public distance between herself and the companion. The adviser could not remember the woman's name but said the relationship did not last long after that.

After Jordan arrived in Austin to begin her legislative career, she met the woman who would be her close friend and companion for the rest of her life. Jordan first encountered Earl while on a camping trip with a group of women friends. The encounter is described in Jordan's 1979 autobiography, *Barbara Jordan: A Self-Portrait*: "At some point in the evening Nancy Earl arrived, and that was the first time we'd met face to face. Nancy and I sat there playing the guitar; we had

TAYLOR JOHNSON/AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN



Nancy Earl (center) confers with Jordan family members after the January 20 burial ceremony.

just met but we were singing and drinking and having a swell time.... I had had a great time and enjoyed myself very much. I remember I thought: This is something I would like to repeat. I'd like to have another party like that. Nancy Earl is a fun person to be with. We all did have other parties. There were many other occasions where I could relax and enjoy myself.... I liked to be part of those parties. I had discovered I could relax at parties like that where I was safe."

In 1972 Jordan ran for Congress in a new House district that state lawmakers created especially for her. And for the next six years Jordan left an indelible mark on Washington. She served on the House Judiciary Committee, which adopted articles of impeachment against President Richard Nixon, and she made sure her deep, resonant voice was heard.

"My faith in the Constitution is whole, it is complete, it is total," she said during nationally televised impeachment hearings. "I am not going

## The life and times of Barbara Jordan

1936

Barbara Jordan is born in a segregated neighborhood in Houston.

1960

As a young attorney, Jordan volunteers for John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign.

1962

Jordan runs for a seat in the state house of representatives and is defeated.

1964

Jordan again runs for the state house and again is defeated.

1964-5

Political advisers warn Jordan to hide her lesbianism.

1966

Jordan wins a seat in the Texas state senate; she's the body's first black woman member.

Late '60s

Jordan meets Nancy Earl, her lifetime companion, on a camping trip.

1972

Jordan is elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

1974

Jordan becomes a media sensation during televised coverage of the House Judiciary Committee's debate over impeaching President Nixon.

1975

In a *Cosmopolitan* magazine survey, 700 political opinion leaders place Jordan at the top of the list of women they'd like to see become president.



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to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution."

Earl, who has a master's degree in educational psychology, remained close to Jordan during the lawmaker's years in Washington, D.C., though she lived in Texas and, for a short time, in upstate New York. Jordan's autobiography described her as "tanned and tow-haired, she wanted to pick watercress in the shade of cypress trees, plant grass on the back slopes, be outdoors when she was not in the professional situation of her job."

In 1976 she and Jordan began building a home together on five acres of land near Austin. The couple threw a bash to celebrate the Bicentennial, with friends and family taking part. After the fireworks ended and Jordan's two sisters returned home, they sent Earl a letter: "Dearest Nancy, Barbara is our most precious possession: our sister, our congresswoman, and our friend. We shall be eternally grateful to you for your pro-

viding such a picturesque setting for our celebration of the nation's birthday and our friendship."

On December 10, 1977, Jordan shocked the nation by announcing she would not run for reelection. Her "internal compass," she said, told her to "divert my energy to something different and to move away from demands which are all-consuming." But Jordan had also been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, which forced her to walk around the Capitol with a cane. At the time, though, she adamantly denied that she had a chronic health problem or that the ailment was partly responsible for her departure.

A month after Jordan said 1978 would be her last year in Congress, Earl went to work in Jordan's office in Washington, D.C. Congressional records show that Earl had the title "special assistant" and was the second-highest-paid person in Jordan's office. Another staffer at the time recalled that Earl wrote speeches for Jordan and occasionally dealt with reporters. Upon her retirement from Congress, Jordan and Earl returned to Austin, where Jordan taught at the University of Texas's Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. In 1994, however, she briefly reentered public life to chair a presidential task force on immigration.

In private life Jordan rarely granted interviews. Earl remained largely in the background—with one notable exception. In 1988 Jordan nearly drowned in her backyard swimming pool while performing physical therapy. Earl, who had left Jordan alone briefly, returned to find her floating and jumped into the pool to revive her. Media accounts at the time iden-

1976

Jordan delivers a keynote address at the Democratic National Convention and is one of 14 people Jimmy Carter considers for the vice presidential nomination. Jordan builds a house with Earl in Austin.

1977

Jordan announces she will leave Congress after her term expires in 1978. She lands a teaching job at the University of Texas at Austin.

1979

An erroneous but widely disseminated media report says that Jordan is dying of a bone disease. Jordan vehemently denies that she has a chronic illness.

1988

Jordan nearly drowns and is saved by Earl. Her physicians announce that she has multiple sclerosis.



REUTER

1994

President Clinton awards Jordan the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

1994

Jordan chairs a presidential task force on immigration.



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1996

Jordan succumbs to viral pneumonia in Austin.

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tified Earl as Jordan's "housemate."

Reached at her home for this article, Earl declined to discuss her life with Jordan in much depth. Asked about being labeled Jordan's longtime companion by the *Houston Chronicle*, Earl said, "I was her good friend. I was there morning and night to help her get up and get showered and get dressed and go to work. She had lots of companions. People can say whatever they want. She was a friend of mine. You can write what you want."

## AdvocatePOLL

What is your reaction to the disclosure that Barbara Jordan was a closeted lesbian who chose not to come out during her lifetime?

#1 I respect her less now

#2 I understand why she chose not to come out and still respect her

#3 It makes no difference to me

To participate in this survey, call

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But if people in Texas did not know the exact nature of Jordan's relationship with Earl, its depth was well-understood. On January 20, during Jordan's funeral at the church where her father had preached, former Texas governor Ann Richards began her eulogy by speaking directly to Earl. "Well, Nancy," Richards drawled, "I always thought Barbara would preach at my funeral." Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, who now represents Jordan's old district, also mentioned Earl by name.

Before the funeral Jordan's sisters turned to Earl, who was sitting behind them, and hugged her. Later, during Jordan's burial at the Texas State Cemetery in Austin, they motioned for Earl to sit with them in the front row, under the cedar tree that would forever shade Jordan's grave. Earl shook her head and pointed to a back row. That was where the friends sat. ●

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